

# CONDUCTORS COUNT

WHAT CHORUS BOARDS  
MUSIC DIRECTORS  
AND ADMINISTRATORS  
NEED TO KNOW

*Published by*  
**CHORUS AMERICA**

*in collaboration with*  
*Westminster Choir College*  
*of Rider University*

# CONTENTS

**v Acknowledgments**

**vii Foreword**

**ix Preface**

**1 Chapter 1**

## THE LIFE OF A MUSIC DIRECTOR

*Issues that Affect the Future of Choral Conducting*

**5 Chapter 2**

## WORKING WITH THE MUSIC DIRECTOR

*Five Factors that Influence the Relationship*

The Music Director's Professional Life .....6

The Music Director's Management Responsibilities .....8

*Sidebar: What Music Directors Do* .....8

The Founder's Position with the Chorus .....10

The Nature of the Organization and the Role of the Singers .....11

The Nature of the Board .....12

*Sidebar: Characteristics of a Successful Music Director*.....14

**17 Chapter 3**

## PREPARING FOR THE FUTURE

*Essential Practices for Transitioning Choruses*

Understanding the Organizational Life Cycle.....18

Moving an Organization Out of the Founding Stage .....19

    Founders and Planning .....20

    Founders and Their Boards .....20

    Founders and Staff.....21

Readiness for Change .....21

    Shared Decisionmaking.....22

    An Engaged Board .....22

Broad-Based Board Membership .....	22
Active Board Leadership .....	23
Candid Communication .....	23
Succession Planning .....	23
Strategic Planning .....	23
Deciding To Disband the Chorus .....	24
<i>Sidebar: Assessing Readiness To Change</i> .....	24

**27 Chapter 4**

**MANAGING A MUSIC DIRECTOR TRANSITION**

*The Steps To Take*

Announce the Change .....	28
Clarify Transition Roles .....	29
Conduct an Organizational Assessment .....	30
Develop a Timeline and Budget .....	31
Appoint the Search Committee .....	33
Decide Whether To Hire a Search Consultant .....	33
Communicate with Stakeholders .....	35
Clarify Expectations and Develop a Job Description.....	36
Decide on a Compensation Package .....	37
Prepare a Profile of the Organization and Its Culture .....	38
Evaluate Candidates and Make a Selection.....	39
Negotiate a Contract .....	41
Closing Activities in the Search .....	41

**43 Chapter 5**

**THE NEW MUSIC DIRECTOR'S FIRST YEAR**

*Setting the Course for Success*

Introducing the Music Director To the Organization .....	44
Establishing External Relationships.....	46
Founders During the Transition .....	47
Evaluating the Music Director .....	47

**49 Resources**

**53 About Chorus America**

# THE LIFE OF A MUSIC DIRECTOR

## ISSUES THAT AFFECT THE FUTURE OF CHORAL CONDUCTING

**M**usic director of a 150-voice all-volunteer chorus. Assistant conductor of an international music festival. Founding music director of a 30-voice professional ensemble. Professor in a graduate conducting program. Conductor of a university chamber chorus. Guest conductor of performances with other choruses. Composer of sacred choral music. Music scholar and author. Board member of a children's chorus.

In many professions, these accomplishments would span a full career. But in the world of choral music, the list could describe the work of one person over the course of a year. For a choral conductor, a career is a rich blend of artistic tasks—with teaching, writing, community outreach, administration, fundraising, and an assortment of other responsibilities added to the mix.

Chorus America surveyed nearly 700 music directors in 2005 to learn about choral conducting as an occupation. We asked about their background, experience, conducting responsibilities, compensation and benefits, and level of satisfaction

with their careers. This first-ever national survey—the most comprehensive of its kind—gave us a deeper understanding of the music director as artist, administrator, and community figure.

These were the key findings of the report, *Choral Conductors Today: A Profile*:

**1. Choral conductors tend to knit together a career by leading several choruses**

- The typical conductor leads two or three choruses, often of different types
- Conductors meet with singers in each chorus an estimated 74 times over the course of a season, counting both rehearsals and performances
- The 1,612 choruses led by survey respondents include more than 81,000 singers

**2. Choral conductors have high job satisfaction even in the face of career-related challenges**

- Conductors are generally very satisfied in their work
- Those who stay with choral conducting tend to earn more and become more satisfied as they age
- Their average annual combined incomes are in the mid-\$50,000 range; those with doctorates and/or employed as full-time educators generally earn more
- Average income for female conductors is about 74 percent of male conductors
- Male conductors lead proportionally more community, school, volunteer, religious, and professional choruses. Female conductors lead more children's choruses
- Few choruses provide employment benefits such as health and retirement benefits
- Conductors perform a wide range of roles and responsibilities within their choruses

**3. The majority of choruses led by survey respondents were founded a generation or more ago, and one in three of those choruses is still led by its founder**

- On average, the choruses conducted by respondents were founded in the 1970s
- Respondents have founded more than 200 choruses since the year 2000
- One in three choruses is still conducted by its founding music director

**4. Education and training for choral conducting is quite varied; most conductors continue to hone their skills throughout their careers**

- Eighty-five percent of respondents believe their education prepared them well for their work
- Conductors who are full-time educators are more likely than other respondents to have specialized in choral conducting
- Conductors who affiliate with Chorus America and other professional organizations tend to earn more than those without affiliations and to be more satisfied
- Conductors invest time and effort to maintain and improve their knowledge and skills on artistic and management topics

**5. Choral conductors share many characteristics with the singers in their choruses**

- The early choral singing experience of conductors parallels that of choral singers as a whole
- Conductors are active in cultural life and are audience members for a variety of arts performances
- Conductors are generous supporters of charity, giving an average of \$3,900 to all causes, and \$1,400 to arts and culture

**6. Choral conductors make a life-long commitment to the choral field**

- Forty-seven percent of respondents intended to become choral conductors
- Conductors of all ages intend to stay in the field; more than half of those between the ages of 50 and 65 intend to be conducting 10 years into the future

Our conclusion from the study is that the choral field is strong and growing stronger. Interest in choral music—from both participants and audiences—is impressive. Conductors expect the number of their choruses' performances to remain steady and, in about one-third of cases, to grow. Choruses enjoy outstanding artistic leadership by highly trained and motivated conductors, many of whom are actively improving their skills. Many choral conductors are entrepreneurial, given that one-third of them are leading choruses that they founded. Overall, they are very satisfied with their chosen profession, and most want to stay in the field. Conductors model the best in arts participation in their own lives as generous contributors to charity, the arts, and their own choruses.

But the study also raised some concerns:

- ***Because one chorus in three is led by its founder and many of them have had lengthy tenures, the choral field faces significant leadership transitions in coming years.*** Leadership transitions will be especially significant in choruses where music directors play a major role in defining the mission.
- ***Music directors need options for professional development.*** Postgraduate education is important to music directors, who continue to refine their skills throughout their careers. But tuition and training funds are offered only by about one-third of choruses overall—and by one-sixth of those outside of educational and religious institutions.
- ***Choral conductors lack adequate health coverage and retirement benefits.*** Building a career out of multiple jobs makes health care and retirement planning a challenge. Nearly 41 percent of the survey respondents reported receiving no employment benefits from their choruses. School/university and volunteer religious choruses offer the most generous benefits, while community and children’s choruses offer the least.
- ***There is a clear gender gap in salary levels.*** Women reported both lower compensation and slightly larger workloads than their male counterparts—regardless of their workplace setting and level of education. Although the difference is consistent with that of the workforce as a whole (female conductors earn about 25 percent less than male conductors), it is still cause for concern.

Artistic leadership of a chorus is both an individual balancing act and a highly collaborative endeavor. The following chapters explore factors that support the music director in his or her role, along with factors that contribute to the teamwork that is so necessary in a successful choral organization.

**“A must-have book for every chorus, whether amateur or professional, large or small, church or community. Conductors, staff, and board members will find the clear guidelines useful and practical.”**

—*H. Royce Saltzman, Executive Director, Oregon Bach Festival; Former President, American Choral Directors Association and International Federation for Choral Music*

**“I recommend this book to any chorus involved in succession planning or anyone who sees changes in artistic leadership anywhere on the horizon — it’s never too early to think about the issues presented here.”**

—*Jonathan Miller, Founder and Artistic Director, Chicago a cappella*

**“How I wish that I had read this 10 years ago!”**

—*Joyce Garrett, Founder and Advisor, Washington Youth Choir*

**“An excellent tool—any arts organization could make good use of it!”**

—*Carole Birkhead, Former Chairman, Louisville Orchestra and American Symphony Orchestra League*

**“This is wonderful and should be required reading for all of us!”**

—*Terry Knowles, Executive Director, Los Angeles Master Chorale*

1156 15th Street N.W., Suite 310  
Washington, DC 20005  
202-331-7577; Fax 202-331-7599  
[service@chorusamerica.org](mailto:service@chorusamerica.org)  
[www.chorusamerica.org](http://www.chorusamerica.org)